



bulletin

for Parent Educators



Strengthening Parent Education
Across Canada

JANUARY 2004

Calling all Parent Educators!

With funding from Health Canada, the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada) and Family Service Canada have undertaken a project to increase capacity in the field of parent education. The project aims to provide useful information and practical ideas in an accessible format.

This is the second of four issues of a Bulletin for Parent Educators to be published over the duration of the project for distribution to parent educators across Canada. Feel free to copy and share it with your colleagues. It can be downloaded from the FSC and FRP Canada websites.

We often hear parent educators express a sense of professional isolation. They work in different types of organizations; many of them work on a freelance and part-time basis. No single umbrella group or organization exists to help them connect. Without a strong sense of identity and connection, it's hard to organize parent educators as a group.

This project has allowed us to hold community gatherings and share information about local, provincial and other associations that connect parent educators. The article on page 2 of this issue describes two of these meetings. In addition, we will produce a handbook to provide tips, tools and a catalogue of resource materials parent educators in Canada have found useful. If you would like to help us, please call or e-mail us. We welcome your ideas.

Kathleen Stephenson
Family Service Canada
(613) 722-9006
kstephenson@sympatico.ca

Janice MacAulay
FRP Canada
(613) 237-7667, ext. 223
macaulay@frp.ca

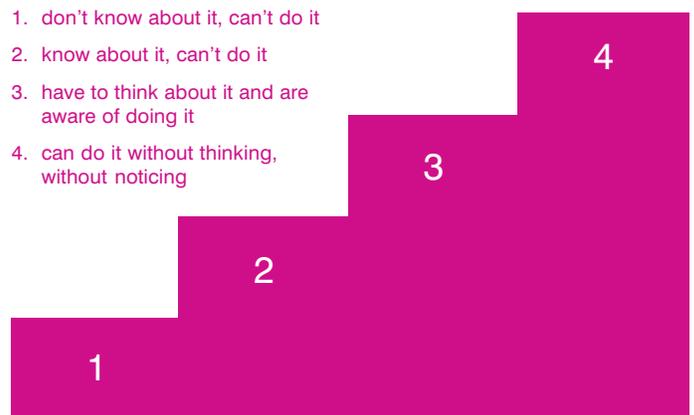
Staircase to Change

Some parents will come to a parenting group to pick up a few skills and confirm that they are basically on the right track. Others will come because what they're doing is not working and they want to change. Still others will come because someone told them to. As a facilitator, your job is to support all parents in achieving their goals. But in the case of parents who want to change, neither you nor they should expect an overnight miracle.

One way to look at the process of mastering a new skill is to see it as a staircase on which the learner moves through a series of steps. People often spend a long time on one step before moving to the next. Indeed, from time to time they may even drop back a step. Sometimes, facilitators observe that over the weeks a group is in session, participants' behaviour at home doesn't seem to change much. Or, if it does, people have difficulty maintaining the changes. In most cases, progress is not straightforward, and it can take a long time to reach the last step.

Step by step

Anytime we acquire a new skill, we move through a series of steps, as shown in the diagram below.



We start from the first step, the stage of not being able to do the new skill. At this point, we're so unaware of it, we don't even know that we can't do it. After we are exposed to the new skill, we move to Step 2, the stage of knowing about it, and recognizing that we can't do it. This can be an uncomfortable place to be. Many people feel guilty or incompetent when they realize that there is a better way to do things but they don't know how to go about it.

(cont'd...)

Gradually, with *lots* of practice, we move to Step 3, the stage of being able to perform the skill. But every time we do it, we have to think about it and we're aware we're doing it. At the fourth step, the final stage of acquiring a skill, it has become so much a part of who we are that we do it automatically, without even noticing we're doing it.

Learning a communication skill

An example of a communication skill that you may want to teach to parents is a three-part I-message. (This is part of a number of courses, including *Parent Effectiveness Training* and *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen*.) If the participants in your group are hearing about this approach for the first time, it is relatively easy to move them from the first to the second step, from not knowing to knowing. You could demonstrate the skill to the group and set up some exercises and role plays for them to practise. But moving from the second to the third step; that is, becoming aware of when they could use it in their daily life and then actually formulating appropriate sentences... that's another matter. If you have ever presented this skill, you know that it takes weeks of coaching and support before participants can start to actually do this at home. Your group will probably end while they are still at this stage of acquiring the skill.

It could take months before even highly motivated parents will be able to confidently pull this technique out when they need it. The authors of *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*, Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, raised this problem with their mentor, Dr. Haim Ginott. He said that, for most people, learning this skill would be like learning a foreign language—they would always speak with an accent. In other words, parents who didn't hear this kind of statement when they were growing up might never get to Step 4 where they use the technique so naturally that they aren't even aware of it. However, for their children, Dr. Ginott said, it would become their mother tongue.

Noting progress

Knowledge of these steps in acquiring a new skill will help when it comes time to assess learning and progress in a group. Unless you're facilitating a group that meets over many months, you will probably see your participants for the last time when they are still moving back and forth between Steps 2 and 3. Both you and your participants can recognize this as normal progress and adjust your goals accordingly.

When parents expect instant results, either from themselves or their children, they tend to be disappointed, then discouraged and sometimes demotivated. If parents seem discouraged at their less than perfect mastery, seeing the staircase drawing may help them have more realistic expectations. You can take the opportunity to point out that children go through a similar "staircase" process and that they too need time to learn a new skill. By understanding the effort and time required to change old patterns, parents may be better able to recognize and celebrate signs of gradual progress in themselves and their children.

Community Meetings for Parent Educators

During the project, community meetings have been held across Canada to help parent educators support families. Following the success of the Symposiums held in Ottawa and Charlottetown in November 2002, two more meetings were held in 2003.

Approximately 45 participants attended the day-long Symposium for Parent Educators organized in **Saskatoon** by Bev Digout and Parenting Education Saskatchewan. They heard Dr. Joan Durrant give an excellent presentation on the development of family-friendly public policy, notably the case of Sweden. In particular, she spoke about the issue of physical punishment. A meta-analysis of numerous studies indicates that there are no benefits and many negative effects from physical punishment. An afternoon workshop covered the basics of facilitation skills.

Two Certified Canadian Family Educators (CCFE), Sandy Shuler of Calgary Jewish Family Services and Marie McNaughton, organized the Symposium in **Calgary** for over 80 participants. The morning session was given by Resiliency Canada. This Calgary organization is developing indicators and undertaking studies of resiliency in youth, through the Calgary Board of Education. The presentation underlined the enormous impact of the family on resiliency.

"Dealing with Difficult Situations" was a workshop developed by Rosemary Reilly, M. Ed. and CCFE, Department of Applied Human Sciences, Concordia University, **Montreal**. The workshop was led by David Sax, Carol Matusicky and Gus Fraser, members of Family Service Canada's Family Education Committee. Participants appreciated the chance to hone their facilitation skills.